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978-0-521-02765-6 - Yuan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School

Chih-P'ing Chou

Excerpt

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**THE LITERARY SCENE BEFORE THE RISE OF
THE KUNG-AN SCHOOL**

Literary criticism in the late Ming

Literary criticism flourished during the late Ming as never before. Never in the history of Chinese literature had so many educated men dedicated themselves to the study of literary theories. During the last century of the Ming dynasty literary theory no longer remained the exclusive preserve of theorists; it became a popular subject among many men of letters. As one of the major channels through which writers expressed themselves, literary criticism became almost inseparable from philosophy and was more closely related to common sentiment and feeling than had ever before been the case.

Late Ming poets and essayists consciously tried to put their theories into practice. Although applications of theory were not always consistent in their works, their enthusiasm and sincerity about practicing what they believed cannot be questioned. It was this enthusiasm that turned late Ming literary criticism into a highly polemical subject, so much so that a skeptical and adversarial tone colored almost all discussions of literature. As soon as one critic established a theoretical basis for criticism, it was immediately subjected to revision by another critic. Late Ming literary criticism is consequently characterized by a wide range of distinctive attitudes toward literature and a variety of literary movements.

The development of literary criticism during the Ming dynasty coincided with the decline of classical poetry and prose. This decline was most often attributed to the adoption of the eight-legged essay (*pa-ku wen*) in the civil examination system.¹ Huang Tsung-hsi (1610–95) stated in his preface to the *Ming-wen an* that during the three centuries of Ming rule, intellectuals had exhausted themselves writing nothing but eight-legged essays and had paid no attention to the classical prose (*ku-wen*).² Under such circumstances, the decline of classical prose was only natural.

Wu Ch'iao, a seventeenth-century critic, offered a similar interpretation of the decline of poetry during the Ming dynasty:

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People are willing to concentrate on things that are related to their honor and wealth. During the T'ang period, honor and wealth lay in poetry, therefore people gave their full attention to poetry and created new styles . . . During the Ming dynasty, honor and wealth lay in *shih-wen* [i.e. the eight-legged essay], people exhausted themselves on *shih-wen*, and poetry was only composed with their spare energy.³

While the precise reasons for this decline may be debatable, scholars are in general agreement that the quality of Ming poetry and prose is not on a par with that of the T'ang and Sung dynasties.⁴ Literary discussion and argument among Ming critics therefore focused for the most part on the revival of classical poetry and prose. No matter how different these critics' approaches might seem to be, they shared a similar goal: to breathe new life into poetry and prose. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, members of various literary schools all believed that their theories would not only prolong the life of classical poetry and prose, but would also instill new spirit into these two ancient genres. Literary criticism for Ming critics was not merely a special study, but rather a life-long commitment. Their sense of mission and their desire to resuscitate the life of literature in general, and of poetry and prose in particular, are clearly reflected in their writings.

Even though the major portion of Ming literary criticism centered on poetry and prose, the evolution and flowering of fiction and drama was not altogether ignored by Ming critics. This was especially true during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when a considerable number of intellectuals devoted themselves to writing novels and dramas. In a very short period of time various theories regarding these new genres appeared.⁵ In respect of the traditional concept of literature, which excludes fiction and drama, late Ming literary criticism comprised an unusually diverse body of critical writings.

The general intellectual climate of the last century of the Ming dynasty was characterized by the synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism; every intellectual of this period was more or less influenced by these three teachings. The traditional Confucian ethics faced serious challenges from Taoism and Buddhism. Intellectuals were eager to explore new directions not only for their scholarly interests, but also for the guidance of their daily lives. Long-established Neo-Confucian doctrines were no longer accepted as the ultimate authority; such basic philosophical concepts as 'mind' (*hsin*), 'nature' (*hsing*), 'reason' (*li*) and 'emotion' (*ch'ing*) all came under careful scrutiny and were redefined in more human terms. Human emotions, especially the love between men and

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women, were no longer regarded as an evil instinct, but were recognized as a part of human nature which should be treated with respect. Sensualism became a shared aesthetic among men of letters during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In this diverse intellectual climate, literary critics passionately argued as never before that the function of literature was nothing but the exhibition of human emotions. The word emotion, or *ch'ing*, became a central theme in literary criticism.⁶ The concept of literature as a vehicle for moralistic and utilitarian purposes was no longer dominant during this period. Thus the major trend in the literary criticism of the late Ming was expressive and not pragmatic.

The Archaist school

The development of late Ming literary criticism has often been represented as a confrontation between the Archaist and Individualist schools. The Archaist school was represented by the 'Former and Latter Seven Masters' (*Ch'ien-hou ch'i-tzu*),⁷ and the Individualist school by the three Yüan brothers (*San Yüan*)⁸ from Kung-an, Hupeh; this school consequently also came to be known as the Kung-an school.

Historical evaluations of the Archaist and the Kung-an schools have differed greatly over the course of time. During the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911) the three Yüan brothers were criticized as radicals and were said to have been responsible for the decline of Ming literature in general and of poetry in particular. Their expressive theories of literature were seen by many Ch'ing critics as a formula for vulgarity and shallowness.⁹ Only with the rise of the modern literary reform movement in the early twentieth century was the reputation of the Kung-an school restored. After having been criticized and then ignored for three centuries, the Yüan brothers became literary heroes in the 1930s and 1940s. What had been defects for the Ch'ing critics became for twentieth-century scholars laudable features of their works.¹⁰ In a similar reversal of opinion, the Former and Latter Seven Masters, once the dominant figures of Ming literature, were in turn criticized as uncompromising conservatives and mindless imitators.

Such changes in the reputations of historical literary figures strongly reflect the biases and preconceptions of both Ch'ing dynasty and twentieth-century critics. With few exceptions, critics have exploited the ideas of the Archaist Masters as well as those of the Yüan brothers and have molded them to serve various contemporary needs. This is especially true of scholars writing during the 1930s. Whether they condemned or

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acclaimed their ideas, critics of the 1930s constantly sought to use Ming literary figures to serve the modern purpose of opposing classical Chinese and supporting the vernacular literature movement. In addition to these literary goals, Lin Yutang (1895–1976) was interested in promoting a leisurely lifestyle which he believed was best illustrated through *hsiao-p'in wen*, a short and informal essay of the late Ming.

In 1932 Chou Tso-jen (1885–1968) directly linked the Kung-an school with the modern literary movement and designated it as 'the origin of modern Chinese literature' (*Chung-kuo hsin wen-hsüeh ti yüan-liu*).¹¹ In so doing, he made explicit his purpose for praising the Kung-an school; however, he failed to provide a dispassionate verdict on the school. In other words, the history of late Ming literature has to a great extent been treated by modern scholars as a tool to support or to denigrate modern literary theories. Modern critics have not really tried to understand Ming writers in their historical context.

On the surface, scholarly opinions of the 1930s seem to be completely at odds with the Ch'ing critical stance. In reality, both Ch'ing and twentieth-century critics shared a similar approach to late Ming literature. In both periods the Archaist and Kung-an schools were considered mutually exclusive, and the three Yüan brothers were seen as radical reformers who found fault with whatever the Archaist Masters expounded. In order to make this dichotomy work and to widen further the gap between these two schools, both Ch'ing critics and modern scholars either overlooked or purposely neglected the expressive elements of Archaist theories and the conservative side of the Kung-an school. It is this dichotomy that has led people to believe that the Former and Latter Seven Masters and the three Yüan brothers were as different as black and white and that there was no continuity in the development of the trend toward self-expression from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. Once freed from the preconceptions of such traditional interpretations of late Ming literature, one finds that the points of theoretical difference between the two schools are fewer than might be expected. Furthermore, some theoretical points were actually shared by both sides. With this in mind, a different picture of the rise of the Kung-an school emerges. The trend toward self-expression was not initiated by the Yüan brothers, but was instead part of a long tradition in the literary criticism of the Ming period which the Yüan brothers inherited and enhanced.

This introductory chapter will investigate some arguments favoring expressive qualities found in the writings of the three major Archaist Masters, Li Meng-yang (1473–1529), Hsieh Chen (1495–1575) and Wang Shih-chen (1526–90), and will give them the long overdue critical attention they deserve.

The literary theories of the Archaist school can be summarized by two statements which have been attributed to Li Meng-yang. First, the prose of the Ch'in (221–207 BC) and Han (206 BC to AD 220) dynasties, and the poetry of the High T'ang (*Sheng T'ang*) period comprised the only acceptable models for students of literature.¹² Second, imitation of ancient works was the only and necessary way to achieve literary excellence.¹³ In view of their limited regard for the literature of the past and their imitative approach to literary creation, theories of the Archaists have often been described by modern scholars as anti-individual, anti-natural and anti-creative. Some of their works indeed contain many archaic expressions, sometimes to the point of plagiarism.¹⁴ However, it is not fair to state that the Archaist Masters actually advocated plagiarism. While it may have resulted as a consequence of their theories, plagiarism was hardly what they had originally advocated. In fact, the Archaist Masters actually despised writers who pilfered from ancient works. In a preface to the collected works of Chu-ko Liang (181–234), Li Meng-yang wrote: 'Those who truly know how to speak do not plagiarize in order to gain fame, and those who have true command of language do not follow old ideas in order to make their opinions known.'¹⁵ To say that the works of the Archaist Masters are marred by slavish imitation is quite different from saying that they advocated plagiarism. It is my opinion that the literary criticism of the Archaist Masters was more far-reaching and inventive than their literary works, and that their achievements in theory should not be overshadowed by the defects of their *works*.

'Imitation' (*mo-ni*) is certainly not a prominent term in the modern vocabulary of literary criticism. It is often equated with lack of creativity and is even associated with plagiarism. However, when Li Meng-yang spoke of imitation in his arguments, he meant adhering to certain basic rules of writing exemplified in ancient works.

Ho Ching-ming (1483–1521), another leading member of the Former Seven Masters, once criticized Li Meng-yang by saying that 'the best of your works are but shadows of the ancients, and the lesser ones have already lapsed into contemporary idiom.'¹⁶ Ho also pointed out the lack of creativity in Li's works and sarcastically said: 'I have never seen you build a hall or open up a door or window by yourself. How can you seek [literary] immortality so eagerly?'¹⁷

Li Meng-yang defended himself by arguing that in following ancient works 'foot by foot and inch by inch' (*ch'ih-ch'ih erh ts'un-ts'un*), he was like a carpenter who used a compass and ruler to make a circle and a square. No matter what the carpenter had to build, the basic tools – compass and ruler – were always the same. With this analogy, Li Meng-yang expressed his belief in the existence of universal rules governing

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excellence in literary writing. He held that if such rules could be ascertained and then closely followed, the qualities of the ancient works could be attained once again.¹⁸ The problems with such an analogy are threefold. Do universal rules exist for writing? If they do, are they as tangible as a carpenter's compass and ruler? Is writing poetry and prose the same kind of activity as building a house? The answers to these three questions are highly debatable. Li Meng-yang's theory is based on an unproven premise, and this defect in his argument later became a target of criticism. However, as Li Meng-yang defined it, imitation was by no means a synonym for plagiarism; it was the means whereby one re-discovered the rules of ancient writers.

There is no doubt that Li Meng-yang emphasized the importance of models and rules for literature, but this does not imply that he was anti-expressive. According to Li Meng-yang's theory of literature, adherence to poetic rules and expression of emotion were not mutually exclusive; they were in fact compatible and complementary. Thus, for Li Meng-yang, a good poet was one who could blend these two qualities into a single work, and a good poem was a harmonious amalgamation of rules and emotions. In fact, his writings do not lack individualistic and expressive elements. He never denied that poetry was a reflection of one's emotion. In his preface to the poetry collection of a certain Master Chang ('Chang-sheng shih-hsü'), he quoted a famous line from the major preface to the *Book of Poetry* ('Shih ta-hsü'): 'Poetry expresses intent' (*shih yen-chih*),¹⁹ a statement that has been widely recognized as the origin of expressionism in the history of Chinese literature.²⁰ In another preface to the poetry of a certain Master Lin ('Lin-kung shih-hsü'), Li Meng-yang wrote: 'Poetry is a reflection of one's personality' (*Shih che, jen chih chien che yeh*).²¹ On the basis of this realization, he praised folk songs and called them 'true poetry' (*chen-shih*).²² In a short postscript to a folk song entitled 'Kuo-kung yao,' he stated:

People say that there was no poetry after Confucius edited the *Book of Poetry*. This only refers to official and political poetry (*ya*); as for folk poetry (*feng*), it was derived from folk songs, so how can one say that there was no poetry? Now, I have recorded this folk song in the hope that people will realize that true poetry is indeed to be found among the people.²³

In Li Meng-yang's complete works, *K'ung-t'ung hsien-sheng chi*, there are two *chüan* of *yüeh-fu* containing seventy-two very colloquial poems,²⁴ which show that his high opinion of folk songs manifested itself both in theory and in practice.

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A more comprehensive statement of Li's views on the nature of literature appears in a preface to one of his own poetry collections. In this preface he expressed his opinions in a conversation with a certain Wang Shu-wu:

Poetry is the natural sound of heaven and earth. The chants and rhymes in the streets and lanes, the groans of the ill, and the cheers of the healthy, all that which is sung by one person and harmonized by a group is true poetry and is called *feng*. Confucius said: 'When the ritual is lost, it can be found in the countryside' (*Li shih erh ch'iu chu yeh*).²⁵ Nowadays, true poetry is among people, yet the literati and scholars usually regard rhymed words as poetry . . . Genuineness is the beginning of sound and the source of emotion; it is not a matter of elegance versus vulgarity.²⁶

These ideas were put forth through the mouth of Wang Shu-wu, and Li Meng-yang expressed great admiration for him, saying at the end of the preface:

I was both frightened and ashamed and said: 'My poetry is not true poetry. It is merely what Master Wang calls the rhymed words of literati and scholars. Such poems are devoid of emotion and filled with refined diction.' Since these poems were written during the period of Hung-chih [1489–1505] and Cheng-te [1506–21], I therefore entitled it the *Hung-te Collection (Hung-te chi)*. I also wanted to revise [the poetry in this collection] and seek genuineness, but I am too old [to do that] now!²⁷

Li Meng-yang, the first to lay the theoretical foundation for the Archaist school, does not seem to have been an unreasonable conservative. He was quite able to point out the shortcomings of his own poetry. According to Shen Te-fu's (1578–1642) *Wan-li yeh-huo pien (Anecdotes Collected during the Wan-li Reign)*, Li Meng-yang was extremely fond of such current folk songs as 'So-nan chih,' 'Pang-chuang t'ai' and 'Shan-p'o yang.' He even considered these songs the continuation of the *Kuo-feng* tradition from the *Book of Poetry*.²⁸ The above remarks illustrate that pristine human emotion was highly valued in Li Meng-yang's theory of literature and that he believed the function of poetry was simply to exhibit this emotion. Here Li Meng-yang seems quite unlike his stereotypical image – not at all a die-hard classical and orthodox critic who was interested only in poetic formalism and who ignored the expressive function of poetry. Some of the concepts discussed above were

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shared by the members of the Kung-an school and further developed into more fully articulated theories about a century later.

Some differences, nonetheless, were real and important, one of the fundamental differences between the theories of the Archaist and Individualist schools being found in their respective approaches to Sung poetry. Li Meng-yang held that Sung poetry was not worth studying, whereas the Yüan brothers argued that the corpus of Sung poetry contained works of great value that could not be ignored. This disagreement later became the focus of a dispute between these two schools. Modern scholars are usually very critical of Li Meng-yang's rigid dictum that only High T'ang poetry was worth emulating. However, Li's exclusion of Sung poetry was based on an expressionistic rather than an archaist criterion. In the preface to *Fou-yin chi (A Collection of Earthy Poetry)*, he offered his criticism of Sung poetry:

Sung poets advocated writing poetry with reason (*li*); therefore, [personal feelings toward] wind, clouds, the moon and dew were all abandoned. Later they wrote *shih-hua* [talks on poetry] to teach people [how to write poetry], and people no longer knew what poetry was. It is not that we cannot discuss reason in a poem, but if [a poet] only writes about reason in poetry, why does he not write prose? . . . I have observed that country people often know what poetry is. They do not write in pedantic words; they only write earthy poetry.²⁹

Li Meng-yang held that the functions and styles of poetry and prose were quite different; Sung poetry was in his opinion too prosaic, too rational and not expressive enough.

Another mistaken notion associated with the Archaist Masters has been that the idea of reviving classical literary standards by 'restoring antiquity' (*fu-ku*) was conservative. As Chu Tung-jun, one of the leading modern Chinese literary historians, has pointed out in an article on Ho Ching-ming's literary criticism, 'restoring antiquity' was quite different from 'holding onto the old' (*shou-chiu*), that is being adamantly conservative. 'Holding on to the old' connoted refusing to abandon an old idea or resisting what seemed to be inevitable change, while 'restoring antiquity' connoted dissatisfaction with the present situation and an eagerness to search for a change.³⁰ In the context of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Chinese thought, one could say that the idea of 'restoring antiquity' advocated by the Former Seven Masters was more revolutionary than conservative. Frederick Mote has offered a similar interpretation of the concept of *fu-ku* as it relates to Chinese art in his

article 'The Arts and the "Theorizing Mode" of the Civilization,' and his explanation can also be applied to literary theory. 'Fu-ku, or recovering the past,' Mote wrote, 'could be a self-deceiving slavishness in many minds, but in other minds it could be a revolutionary archaism that spawned competing repudiations of the present, and that bolstered creative approaches to all of man's activities . . . It was a way of linking the universality of human experience with the personal uniqueness of each man's inner experience.'³¹ This was very likely what Li Meng-yang had in mind when he promoted ideas on 'restoring antiquity.'

During the first century of the Ming dynasty, the world of literature was led by highly ranked scholar-officials. Among them the three grand secretaries, Yang Shih-ch'i (1365–1444), Yang Jung (1371–1440) and Yang P'u (1372–1446), were the most influential. They came to be known as the 'Three Yangs' (*San Yang*), and their writings were often referred to as the 'grand secretary style' (*t'ai-ko t'i*). This style was viewed by the eighteenth-century editors of the *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao* as 'graceful and majestic' (*jung-jung*), yet 'monotonous and lacking vitality' (*ch'an-huan jung-t'a*). It was precisely this spiritlessness that inspired Li Meng-yang to launch his campaign to revive classical literary standards.³² His introduction of the 'restoring antiquity' approach was by no means intended to prolong a deteriorating poetic style, but rather to direct the course of literary development so that prose and poetry would become healthier and more substantial than was then the case. Although the results of this movement proved that 'restoring antiquity' was not the right prescription for the 'illness' of Ming poetry and prose, Li Meng-yang's motivation in initiating a literary reform should not be misinterpreted.

Hsieh Chen (1495–1575) was the key figure in the transition from the era of the Former Seven Masters to the era of the Latter Seven Masters. A distinguished poet and literary critic, he was the oldest member of the Latter Seven Masters and the leader of that literary group in its formative stage. His *Ssu-ming shih-hua*, a book of comments on poetry and poets, laid a theoretical foundation for the second phase in the development of the Archaist movement.³³ Although Hsieh Chen's approach to poetry was essentially imitative, he was far more flexible in his approach to imitation than was Li Meng-yang. Li believed that the act of writing poetry was like practicing calligraphy and that poets, like calligraphers, ought to imitate their models as closely as possible. Li Meng-yang held that a poet had achieved something if his work was similar to that of the ancients.³⁴ Hsieh agreed that although such imitation was important, it could only be regarded as a preliminary attainment in poetic composition.

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The final goal for a poet was to 'achieve enlightenment' (*ju-wu*).³⁵ Once a poet achieved enlightenment, imitation was no longer necessary.

Although Hsieh Chen did not precisely define what 'achieving enlightenment' meant, in order to achieve 'enlightenment,' a poet had to explore within himself, and imitation was only the preparation for enlightenment.

Hsieh Chen drew upon two analogies to illustrate what he thought the process of writing poetry was. He said in one of his comparisons: 'Writing poetry is similar to making liquor. In the several areas of Chiang-nan, the basic materials [for making liquors] are rice and yeast, yet the tastes of the liquors are different.'³⁶ Hsieh used 'rice and yeast' as a metaphor for scenes and events that a poet encounters in his life, and the different tastes as a metaphor for the different personalities and experiences of each individual poet. Hsieh Chen also compared writing poetry to the process by which bees made honey. He said that while honey was made from the nectar of various flowers, one could not distinguish the flavor of each flower in the honey. He thereby implied that a poet should learn from ancient poets but that the 'flavor' – the characteristics – of each ancient poet should be blended in one's own work.³⁷ In both cases Hsieh Chen emphasized the process of internalizing what one learned from the ancients. The process of making liquors and honey demonstrated by analogy how this internalization might take place. Of course, these two analogies oversimplify a very complex intellectual process by comparing activities which are essentially different in nature, and the inadequacy of the analogy is quite obvious. However, Hsieh Chen's purpose was not to draw literal-minded analogies but rather to indicate the importance of creating one's own style in poetry and of not being overwhelmed by the ancients.

The essential character of poetry, as far as Hsieh Chen was concerned, resided in the spirit of each individual poet: 'Writing poetry lacking spirit,' he said, 'is similar to drawing the sun and the moon without light.'³⁸ Hsieh Chen further indicated that in writing poetry a poet needed a 'heroic state of mind' (*ying-hsiung ch'i-hsiang*); he had to be able to 'say something that others dare not say and to do something that others dare not do.'³⁹ Such an attitude was actually quite individualistic and certainly cannot be characterized as slavish imitation of the ancient poets.

Hsieh Chen strongly opposed rigid imitation because it reflected neither social reality nor the personality of the poet. He poignantly criticized the imitation of Tu Fu practiced by his contemporaries:

Nowadays, those who imitate Tu Fu are living in wealth and yet talk about poverty and sorrow, living in a time of peace and yet